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Letters to the Editor

Congress's Oversight of Intelligence

Suzanne Garment (Capital Chronicle, April 18) writes that "we would be better off with fewer congressmen intimately involved in intelligence issues," asserting that, when it comes to secrets, "Congress is a sieve." According to Ms. Garment, members of the House and Senate compromised intelligence sources and the planning of the April 15 raid on Libya. Yet, as the column itself points out, the key revelations of evidence from U.S. intelligence of Libyan support of terrorism came from Executive Branch officials and, in fact, the president.

The author goes on to say that "no one thought much" about the ability of Congress to keep secrets when the intelligence committees were established. In fact, the oversight committees were created precisely because members of Congress were concerned with the need for keeping secrets while exercising our constitutional responsibilities. To date, no one has demonstrated that the committees have violated their trust.

The usually skilled Ms. Garment demonstrates little understanding of the oversight process. She says the "29 congressmen plus their staffs (make) it harder to keep secrets." More important than the fact that the combined membership of the House and Senate committees is 31, is the fact that no one on the members' staffs has access to any committee business. The only access to material handled by the committees is by staff members of the committees, who undergo background in-

vestigations similar to those given to personnel of the intelligence community. About half of our staff have served in the community.

Information within the committee staffs is strictly compartmented. Our control and tracking of the flow of documents is more rigorous than in the intelligence community. The total staff for both committees is 62 (compared to the 200,000 individuals who have access to Sensitive Compartmented Information and the approximately two million employees and contractors of the Executive Branch who have access to Top Secret information).

Ms. Garment wonders, "What are we doing with two intelligence oversight committees, when we could do the job with one reasonably sized joint committee?" The answer is this: Congressional oversight is essential to intelligence. Unless members of each house believe their constituents' interests are being adequately represented in the formulation of intelligence policy, the intelligence community will not have the support it needs from the Legislative Branch. This support is always vital, but never more so than in the coming years of budget austerity. (Just ask Bill Casey!)

Also, a Congress that believes its interests are represented in intelligence policy is less likely to second-guess the president on issues of fact. No member of Congress expressed any doubt on the evidence the president used to justify the raids on Libya. This was in large part because the members had confidence that their fiduciaries on the oversight committees were well-informed.

Operational security is the usual reason given for non-consultation. This is an excuse only. The real reason presidential advisers don't want to consult is that they don't want Congress to second-guess their recommendations to the president.

A president's leadership is best served by on-going consultation—in detail and in anticipation of special operations—not with all the Congress, but with the four to eight leaders with continuing oversight responsibility to their colleagues. The effect is to enlarge those "in the loop" by a small fraction, but by a crucial political factor which means long-term success of policy based on shared responsibility.

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